DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 308 748 HE 022 520

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TITLE The Political Meaning of Quality.
PUB DATE May 89
NOTE 5p.
AVAILABLE FROM AAHE Bulletin, One Dupont Circle, Suite 600, Washington, DC 20036.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Viewpoints (120)
JOURNAL CIT AAHE Bulletin; v41 n9 p8-11 May 1989

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Accountability; Consumer Protection; Educational Improvement; *Educational Quality; Excellence in Education; Federal Aid; Financial Support; Higher Education; Institutional Survival; Political Attitudes; Quality Control; State Aid

ABSTRACT

Quality as a political goal for public higher education is discussed, and its fuller acceptance at the state over the federal level is noted. Federal policy is driven by values associated with access, need, and equity. State leaders are using a rhetoric of quality and excellence, incentives for high achievement, rigor, and merit. One reason the cause of quality has been taken up by people in higher education has been its extraordinary usefulness as a rationale for generating new income. In the 1980s, higher education institutions needed quality funding to move ahead. They had to act on three fronts to protect their resource base (market their products aggressively, diversify their product line, and convince patrons that added support was needed though workload declined). Quality funding has been added, but usually with prescribed state objectives (e.g. economic development). Today, institutions accepting state money must accept strings. Political roots of the quality movement are explained, noting this movement in its evolution over the past 10 years has developed certain articles of faith (e.g. the public sector should be stratified, and institutions should serve the cause of economic development). The political meaning of accountability is discussed, noting state accountability systems flounder due to inherent decentralization of the educational process. New mechanisms of accountability are noted. One strategy that states may use more aggressively in the future is public disclosure. The question that remains is whether this new wave of political interest in quality will fundamentally alter and improve higher education. (SM)

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The Political Meaning of Quality

by James R. Mingle

Quality, in its most common meaning, is not a specific attribute or an absolute but a goal to which we aspire. It is an inherently ambiguous, elusive goal, so that quality has traditionally been defined and sought in a variety of ways within higher education. What has changed is that quality is increasingly being taken up as a cause by those outside the academy—by governing boards, business groups, political leaders, and the public—each with its own, rather ill-defined set of expectations about what higher education should deliver.

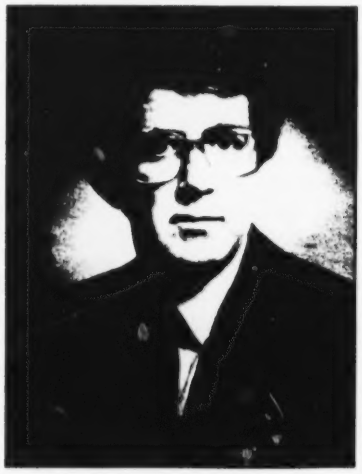
Quality, in short, has become a political term, a code word whose meanings and implications depend on who is using it. Superficially, it becomes a shorthand way of communicating and of uniting people around a goal to which little disagreement can be offered.

Quality as a political goal for public higher education is relatively new, and appears to be more fully accepted at the state than at the federal level. Federal policy continues to be driven by the values associated with access, need, and equity. Meanwhile, state leaders have switched to a rhetoric of quality and excellence, incentives for high achievement, rigor, and merit.

Ironically, this puts state leaders on the same side of the question as many traditional faculty—ironically because those same state leaders often include "productivity" under quality, which is anathema to faculty.

The political definition of quality, from the perspective of the states, is fundamentally conservative and traditional. Quality values are associated with such state policies as assessment, core curricula, selective admissions, incentive funding, merit scholarships, and a division (read "stratification") of labor among institutions. These prescriptions, of course, are not universally true for all states or for all political leaders in a single state. They reflect, however, a central tendency that grows in strength.

No institutional president would dare speak against quality, although many community and regional colleges suspect, sometimes correctly, that all this talk of quality is a way of stealing their share of an appropriation. They feel far more comfortable with the values of equity, which remain the foundation for virtually all funding and allocation systems in the public sector.



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One reason the cause of quality has been taken up by people within public higher education has been its extraordinary usefulness as a rationale for generating new income. Higher education stumbled through the 1970s, in a growth mode but without the dollars to support that growth. The elixir of the 1980s was quality, and it came none too soon: without enrollment growth to generate new revenue, higher education institutions stood in need of "quality funding" to move ahead.

If the resource base was to be protected (the first rule of organizational preservation), institutions in the 1980s needed to act on three fronts simultaneously. First they needed to market their products more aggressively; second they needed to diversify their "product line" and attract new clients; third they needed to convince their patrons that added support was needed even as workload declined.

On the first two counts, colleges and universities have been largely successful. On the third—the quality front—they achieved partial success, but in the process they had to pay a price: greater intrusion into academic issues on the part of state boards, and the acceptance of new strings around state money.

Dependence on workload has been reduced, thus protecting institutions from sudden revenue losses due to enrollment decline. "Quality funding" has been added, but usually with prescribed state objectives—economic development, for example. Some claim this is "categorical funding" with a new name. (As Martin Trow once noted, nothing protected

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faculty and institutional autonomy like enrollment-based formulas. As long as institutions produced the FTEs, the money crank kept turning with little or no state intrusion.

Today, institutions accepting the money must accept the strings. Whether the state's definition of quality has been accepted, however, is another matter. Quality, by the academician's definition, comes from the accrual of prestige *within* the academy. But state leaders are unimpressed by this measure of quality; they want concrete *service to the state*—basic skills, job training, and applied research being three such services.

Political roots of the quality movement

The quality movement in higher education, at least in this decade, began as an offshoot of school reform efforts: higher standards of admission and more rigorous curricula in higher education were seen as a way to boost student performance at the high school level.

Despite the concerns of the higher education community about excessive intrusion, state efforts on behalf of quality have usually entailed more advocacy than directive, and the clearest result is that the public sector has grown significantly in stature and support.

State appropriations per student rose 15 percent after inflation from 1983 to 1987, even as enrollments remained steady (as compared with a 1 percent decline in support from 1973 to 1977, when enrollments grew significantly).[1] Just as important, expectations for the flagship institution have grown considerably; even the poorest states now hope to field a "world class" public university.

The quality movement in its evolution over the past ten years has developed certain "articles of faith" that, while not universally accepted or applied, represent a new mythology of quality as interpreted by state political leaders. For the sake of argument, here are three.

1. College students should take, and faculty should teach, "college-level" courses. This admonition reflects a certain longing for a time when a college degree meant something, namely, few of us had one. It also reveals a certain lack of understanding of, and sympathy for, remediation. Remediation may be tolerated, and even funded, but only as a means to an end, never as a permanent necessity. "We will allow remediation," the legislator declares, "but only until school reform works its wonders."

This attitude also reflects a desire to keep the divisions between secondary and postsecondary firmly in place. It presupposes a linear progression of knowledge, built on rigid prerequisites applicable to most if not all fields—witness the endless search for "college-level math."

Advocates of access and equity, by contrast, seem often to discard notions of lineation and prerequisites; they focus on credit, regardless of content. To many state leaders, this exposes the most vulnerable aspect of the access movement—the substitution of credentials for real learning and skills.

"Restoring the integrity of the baccalaureate" strikes a responsive chord with the public and state boards. The result has been for state boards to push for core curricula and minimum standards across public institutions in a state. These curricular moves, along with pressures to raise admissions standards, reflect a belief (supported by many within higher education) that the "permissiveness" of the 1960s resulted in a diminution of quality.

Public leaders are seldom concerned with the specifics of content, however; it is the restored "rigor" of the collegiate experience that somehow assures them they are supporting quality. Former Secretary Bennett may have been anathema to the higher education establishment, but in the public at large and with many state leaders his critique of higher education was welcomed and, in their view, accurate.

2. The public sector should be stratified. The end of open enrollment in the public sector is a serious departure for many states from a populist tradition that considered it a right, even an entitlement, for every high school graduate to attend the state university. For the first time, at the urging of state leaders, public universities are imposing significant admission standards for their formerly first-come-first-served institutions.

This new commitment to stratification is also apparent in the reemphasis of a fundamental tenet of planning and coordination: a rational division of labor. Destructive competition (in this case "political" competition) is minimized through prescribed statements in planning documents that differentiate the role and mission of institutions.

In the past these planning documents forced differentiation by minimizing duplication, especially at the graduate and professional levels. More recently, however, state and system boards have confronted the hierarchy question more directly—by placing limitations on undergraduate enrollments and by pushing up admissions standards at the flagship institutions.

In part, legislators have embraced this stratification because (a) they think it saves money and (b) the public seems to demand it. If the possession of a baccalaureate no longer means anything special because everyone has one, then parents

and students hope they can distinguish themselves from the crowd by attending a "public elite."

3. Institutions should serve the cause of economic development. State leaders entertain little doubt that an important function of a "quality" public institution is to serve economic ends. This can be seen in several important shifts in public policy in the 1980s.

In financing, the student's share of college costs has risen significantly.[2] State support for applied research and "incubator" programs has risen dramatically. States have enthusiastically supported expansion of programs in business, engineering, and other occupationally related programs.

Not surprisingly, our national fear that we are a declining economic power in the world directly affects higher education. Extraordinary promises are being made on the part of higher education that it can not only serve the cause of economic development but serve it quickly and locally (states see themselves as first in a competitive struggle with other states, then in a global struggle).

In the words of one chancellor: "We find ourselves in the peculiar position of trying to successfully design strategies for economic regeneration, even though the state has a department of development."[3]

The economic development goal pervades educators' rhetoric and appropriation justifications. A quality institution, then, is one that produces quick and substantial returns to the state on its investment either through applied research, direct service to the private sector, or immediate job training. With these state goals in mind, land-grant universities, engineering schools, community colleges, and proprietary schools find themselves in a favored position; liberal arts colleges find themselves in a struggle to keep up.

It is disappointing to me how few quality-of-life questions have entered into this debate. Few distinctions are made by politicians (or pointed out by college presidents) about the relative value of various *kinds* of economic development. If the program has the potential of producing jobs, any job, it is worthy of public subsidy.

The political meaning of accountability

When the governors declared that it was "Time for Results" in their 1987 report, they telegraphed an impatience with the pace of change in higher education and the standards by which institutions were to be held accountable. If quality is the end, then the means is accountability. If faculty instruct and presidents lead and football coaches win their way to quality, then politicians and state boards "account" their way to quality.

This may seem a curious, even antithetic way to achieve quality in the eyes of institutions, but it is viewed by politicians as often the only road available (or maybe the least-expensive road). When Peter Ewell wrote a few years back about "levers for change," he was essentially speaking of nonmonetary levers (or at least of low-cost ones) that could be pulled. Few states in the 1980s were in a position to buy their way to quality, so they decided to account their way there.

State boards and political leaders genuinely believe that accountability mechanisms are a powerful tool for redirecting institutions in ways that those institutions would not voluntarily seek. For all their limitations, the planning and accountability mechanisms put in place have been successful in replacing destructive political processes of an earlier era with rational bureaucratic processes. They have, in short, helped establish a compact of trust between the public and the academy that assures a relatively uninterrupted flow of support.

For most institutions, accountability mechanisms—program reviews, accreditation reviews, assessment instruments, governance studies, even funding formulas—are viewed, if positively at all, as primarily a means for establishing and, it is hoped, enhancing institutional identity.

For politicians and lay board members, accountability instruments are a way to answer what they view as a rather simple question: "What are we getting for our money?" That the answer proves difficult and complex turns out to be the rub.

Seldom have state accountability systems been able to answer definitively the question, "Is the system working?" Are higher education institutions accomplishing their goals? Are they performing better or worse than their peers around the country?

When accountability systems do answer these questions (or even attempt to answer them), there is a great outcry about the validity of the measurements and even the validity of the goals ("we aren't here to *graduate* students, but to provide them with a meaningful experience"). Even when the answer is definitive (for example, "this institution is too small to be financially or academically viable"), there may not be the political or financial capital to do much about the problem.

A good example is student preparation. The evidence about the lack of preparation of high school graduates to handle collegiate work is overwhelming. Data abounds, nationally and statewide, yet full confrontation with this issue, at either the secondary or the postsecondary level, remains elusive.

Shutting down access would "solve" the problem, at least for higher education, but it's unacceptable socially and politically.

State accountability systems flounder because of the inherent decentralization of the educational process. The distance between a publicly perceived need to improve undergraduate education and the conduct of a faculty member in a classroom is simply enormous.

But fully "remediating" students implies a significant change of mission for many institutions, and is deemed financially prohibitive without sacrificing other valued objectives.

The traditional accountability model, then, flounders for a variety of reasons—lack of agreement about goals, lack of cooperation, inability to consider all possible options when sunk costs prohibit radical change, and (probably least of all) the lack of data. More fundamentally, state accountability systems flounder because of the inherent decentralization of the educational process. The distance between a publicly perceived need to improve undergraduate education and the conduct of a faculty member in a classroom is simply enormous.

New mechanisms of accountability

There are indicators that state leaders are moving away from planning and regulatory models of change to market-incentive models. Governors are using their public pulpits astutely. State boards have been evolving from regulators to agenda setters, from comptrollers to policy leaders.

By raising critical issues—minority achievement, undergraduate education, school reform—they are attempting indirectly to influence the agenda of institutions. This is the "politics of hope," efforts to control the agenda and then "hope" for change. One coordinating board executive expressed it this way: "If you define others' concerns, you really don't have to solve their problem; if it is well stated, it begins to solve itself."

This is not to say that the states have abandoned, nor will they abandon, regulatory and consumer-protection statues. Indeed, the negative effects of federal deregulation (for example, the savings and loan crisis) and the fallout from practices in the proprietary sector may cause some resurgence of regulatory activity.

One strategy that states may use more aggressively in the future is "public disclosure," that is, an effort to employ market mechanisms as a substitute for regulation. In theory the process will go like this: the public will be provided information on institutional performance, and institutions will be responsive to these disclosures in order to protect their good will with the legislature and to protect their competitive position with students.

Some institutions do fully embrace outcomes measurement and public disclosure. Many genuinely believe that they are providing a valuable educational experience and welcome the opportunity to prove it. "Public disclosure" of performance usually comes first from the institutions that have performed well on the measure.

Supposedly, *if* the data on college outcomes are accurate, public disclosure could serve as a powerful lever for change. But market pressure on institutions will not be the same as in the private business sector, nor will their response be the same.

Institutions compete not only for students (maybe least of all) but for state appropriations, for federal research grants, and most important for status and prestige among peers. These multiple sources of satisfaction will make them less responsive (though not oblivious) to public disclosure of learning outcomes.

Further to the point, students and parents may not value "quality" as measured by graduation and placement rates, or pass rates on national exams, or value-added scores above the national average. Instead they may, as ever, buy location, architecture, or an out-of-date reputation.

From the student perspective, the market also works less than satisfactorily. Better information on student outcomes should create a more informed choice. But informed choice can only be exercised if conditions permit. Despite our justifiable pride in the diversity of higher education, many students remain place-bound, so that searching out the "best" institution becomes a moot exercise.

The question that remains is whether this new wave of political interest in quality will fundamentally alter, and improve, higher education. On balance, it has been a financial plus for institutions, especially public institutions. They have gained in status and prestige in the public's eye, even in the face of substantial negative data about their performance.

But the stakes have increased, and higher education seems to remain fundamentally on a different wavelength than politicians. The urge to reform seems not quite strong enough from within higher education; the willingness to pay not quite strong enough from the public. Meanwhile both sides wonder whether the new mythology of quality is the essence of truth or merely the fantasies of the past.

Notes

1. Gold, S.D. "The Outlook for State Support of Higher Education." Denver: National Conference of State Legislatures, February 1989.

2. From 1982 to 1988, tuition increases outpaced increases in state appropriations in five out of seven years. In contrast, from 1974 to 1981, appropriations increased at a higher rate every single year. See *Focus on Price—Trends in Public Higher Education: Tuition and State Support*, by John R. Wittstruck and Steve Bragg. Denver: State Higher Education Executive Officers, 1988.

3. *New Issues, New Roles: A Conversation With State Higher Education Executive Officers.* Denver: Education Commission of the States, 1989.